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PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVIST CALLS FOR NEW USG
APPROACH

CLASSIFIED BY: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES WILLIAM ROEBUCK FOR REASONS 1.4 B/D

¶1. (C) POLOFF MET WITH SYRIAN-CANADIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVIST AND IMMIGRATION LAWYER HIND KABAWAT ON JANUARY 8. KABAWAT SAID THAT THE SAME NIGHT AFTER ATTENDING A DECEMBER 19 RECEPTION AT THE AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE FOR CODEL KERRY AND DODD, POLITICAL SECURITY AGENTS CAME TO HER HOUSE TO ASK WHETHER SYRIAN OPPOSITION FIGURE RIAD SEIF HAD ALSO BEEN A GUEST. KABAWAT (WHO HAD NOT KNOWN THAT THE SENATORS MEETING WITH SEIF AT THE EMR HAD IMMEDIATELY PRECEDED THE RECEPTION) TOLD THE SECURITY AGENTS THAT SHE HAD NOT SEEN SEIF, BUT THAT PRESIDENT ASAD COULD ASK THE SENATORS THE QUESTION AT THEIR MEETING THE FOLLOWING MORNING.

¶2. (C) KABAWAT SAID THE USG HAS LOST ITS PUBLIC RELATIONS WAR IN SYRIA BY FOCUSING ON FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES, DEEMED VITAL TO THE UNITED STATES BUT THAT DO NOT RESONATE WITH THE AVERAGE SYRIAN WHO IS PREOCCUPIED BY RISING FOOD AND EDUCATION COSTS. SHE URGED THE USG TO PROVIDE INDIRECT BUT "CLEVER" SUPPORT TO SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY, ARGUING IT WOULD PAY DIVIDENDS FOR YEARS TO COME. "WHY DON'T YOU PAY FOR AN ENGLISH COURSE FOR LABWANI'S DAUGHTER OR ANWAR'S SON?" SHE ASKED REFERRING TO THE UNIVERSITY-AGE CHILDREN OF DETAINED ACTIVISTS KAMAL LABWANI AND ANWAR AL-BUNNI. "THAT WAY YOU TAKE CARE OF THE FAMILIES OF POLITICAL PRISONERS AND BUILD SUPPORT AMONG THE NEXT GENERATION." (NOTE: POST FUNDS ENGLISH LANGUAGE TRAINING AT THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE CENTER FOR A HANDFUL OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS. THE SARG RECENTLY CLOSED AMIDEASTS OFFICE IN DAMASCUS, WHICH COMPLICATES THIS KIND OF PROGRAMMING. END NOTE.)

¶3. (C) THE SARG HAS OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS SEVERELY RESTRICTED THE MARGIN OF MANEUVER FOR CIVIL SOCIETY, SAID KABAWAT WHOSE INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN NOVEMBER WAS CANCELED AT THE LAST MINUTE BY THE MFA. SHE REFERRED TO INCREASED SARG RESTRICTIONS AS A BLIND BACKLASH AGAINST INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE ON THE REGIME, INCLUDING EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH A TRIBUNAL TO TRY THOSE SUSPECTED OF ASSASSINATING FORMER LEBANESE PM RAFIK HARIRI. KABAWAT DESCRIBED HOW SHE HAD RECENTLY CHASTISED HER FRIEND AND SARG MINISTER FOR EXPATRIATES BUTHAYNA SHA'ABAN OVER DINNER FOR CLOSING AMIDEAST "I TOLD HER IT WAS MAKING IT MORE DIFFICULT FOR SYRIAN STUDENTS TO TAKE THE TOEFL EXAM," KABAWAT SAID. SHAABAN RESPONDED BY SAYING THAT AMIDEAST WAS A COVER FOR SPIES, KABAWAT SAID.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: OVER THE YEARS, KABAWAT HAS DEMONSTRATED A RARE ADEPTNESS FOR USING CHARISMA, CONNECTIONS, AND HER CANADIAN CITIZENSHIP TO LOBBY SARG OFFICIALS AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ON BEHALF OF IMPORTANT CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVITIES, INCLUDING THE INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ACTIVITIES.

FOR EXAMPLE, SHE SUCCEEDED IN 2006 IN BRINGING HER AMERICAN FRIEND RABBI MARC GOPIN TO SYRIA FOR PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS ON RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND MEETINGS WITH SYRIAN RELIGIOUS FIGURES. USUALLY UPBEAT, KABAWAT SEEMED DISCOURAGED THIS TIME ABOUT PROSPECTS FOR AN IMPROVEMENT ANY TIME SOON IN THE INTERNAL SITUATION IN SYRIA. HER COMMENTS ECHO THOSE WE HAVE HEARD OVER THE LAST SIX MONTHS FROM OTHER SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY MEMBERS.
ROEBUCK